



Submission on Working Holiday Maker program

The Australian Banana Growers' Council (ABGC) is the national banana industry development association, representing commercial banana growers across Australia. These comments are to inform the current Inquiry into the Working Holiday Maker program.

Background

ABGC (along with many others) had written to Government Ministers in March 2020 with an urgent request for the Australian Government to extend the time visa holders can be in Australia, so that growers can continue to have access to staff. We were very grateful that the Government's response was positive for both the Seasonal Worker Program (SWP 403 visas holders) and for Working Holiday Makers Visa Holders (WHM on 417 or 462 visas). The extension for WHM was provided via the 408 Visas.

Approximately, 96 percent of banana production is in hot conditions of northern Australia, i.e. in Far North Queensland (where 94% is located), as well as in North West WA and near Darwin.

ABGC's March correspondence to Federal Ministers noted whilst it would be ideal to have more Australian workers on banana farms, there are reasons why this is not suitable work for many: the work is usually in hot, wet and humid conditions; it is physically demanding work; and it is shared (hostel) accommodation, rather than family accommodation.

The total number of workers on banana farms nationally was 5,300 in 2017, and 54% of these were Australians, according to data from Pinnacle Agribusinessⁱ. That report also showed 31% were on WHM visas and 15% on SWP visas.

However, there has been more visa holders employed in the last three years, especially via labour hire companies supporting the industry. ABGC estimates the figures currently are likely to be 47% Australians, 25% on WHM visas and 28% on SWP visas.ⁱⁱ

This means approximately 1325 workers currently on WHMs and 1484 on SWPs in the banana industry.

Unlike, most other horticulture, banana work is year-round and workers are required 52 weeks per year. Bananas is also a well-established industry in Australia that has evolved over time in line with labour availability and the willingness of the local workforce to work on banana farms. For this reason, banana producing businesses have worked hard over the years to balance their workforces with WHM and SWP visa holders carrying out the physically demanding work.

ABGC has been advised by members that currently there are no staff shortages and that retaining present staff is imperative to being able to continue to supply bananas to Australian consumers.

Issues

Based on how the COVID-19 pandemic is unfolding in Australia and in other countries, the future scenario appears to be pointing to a shortage of workers for horticulture including banana growers.

The Government's recent announcement on Harvest Labour Services to solve future horticulture workforce is specifically to "support Australian job seekers into harvest jobs." The problem is that this assumes more Australians will want to work on farms. As noted earlier, it is (unfortunately) highly likely that this is not the case for banana farms – as the work is physically demanding and it's in harsh weather conditions.

If backpackers (WHM visa holders) or Pacific Islanders (SWP visa holders) leave the country to go home and are not able to be replaced, due to Government (COVID-19-based) restrictions on in-bound flights, there would be a shortage of staff on banana farms.

Another concern is that if backpackers move to the cities or another region, there could also be a shortage of staff. Some banana growers have advised that many backpackers may have earned sufficient money in a few months' time and could be looking to party, rather than work.

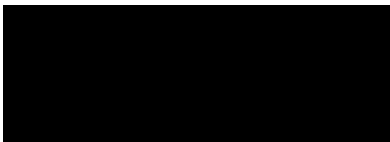
On a positive note, ABGC notes that Australia (except for Victoria) continues to be a very attractive place to be compared to other countries, due to COVID-19, as well as the usual attributes.

Recommendations

ABGC is seeking assistance from the Australian Government to increase the flexibility in retaining our overseas workforce. This could include:

1. Incentives for WHM workers to stay in horticultural work to include a further extension to existing WHM visa holders who are already in Australia.
2. Consideration to allow Pacific Islanders on SWP visas to enter the country. This would allow access to workers on farms and enable those SWP visa holders in Australia now who wish to return to their homes, to do so.

Further Information



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REFERENCES

ⁱ Pinnacle Agribusiness 2018: <https://www.horticulture.com.au/growers/help-your-business-grow/research-reports-publications-fact-sheets-and-more/ba16009/> App 1, p18.

ⁱⁱ ABGC Survey of growers in July 2020